

Win-Win Solution to Preserve Summer Camps while protecting Neighborhoods.

By Councilmember Howard Denis

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Montgomery County is home to many private schools that offer summer day camps and other programs that greatly augment the educational, cultural and recreational opportunities available to County residents. The programs -- which include college preparation courses, arts classes, and performing arts programs -- enhance the quality of life in our community. All of the private schools operate in residentially zoned land as special exceptions. As a result of a recent case before the County Board of Appeals, many of the schools found County law did not specifically authorize the programs they operated.

Following that case, I heard from a number of constituents asking that the Council act to preserve these programs. Those who contacted me were concerned that their children would be unable to enroll for summer camps.

While I believe that private schools can be a great asset to the community, they can also be seen as a burden - especially if traffic clogs up neighborhood streets. With that in mind, I am very attuned to the concerns of constituents who live near private schools who expressed concerns about impacts private schools have on neighborhoods.

To address these sometimes contrasting viewpoints, I co-sponsored a zoning text amendment (ZTA) to create a process for private schools to seek approval for extracurricular programs. As co-sponsor, I had two goals in mind. First, I wanted to ensure programs offered by private schools were not summarily shut down due to a newly discovered gap in the law. Many private schools have operated programs for a long time, and should have a grace period. I also wanted to be certain that programs go through an approval process that involves neighbors and addresses their legitimate concerns.

The final ZTA approved by the Council addressed many points raised in the public testimony and indicates the Council took the community's concerns very seriously. The Council's action set up a process where neighborhoods are protected and programs that meet the standards can

continue. To address concerns raised by private schools and parents, the ZTA provided two years for schools to work with their neighbors and receive approval from the County's Board of Appeals.

Neighborhood concerns were also addressed by the ZTA. The ZTA authorized the Board of Appeals to take into consideration the total number of car trips generated by a schools' regular program and after school or summer programs in evaluating traffic impacts on surrounding neighborhoods. The Council also allowed the Board of Appeals to set a limit on the number of program participants and frequency of large events.

In my opinion the outcome was essentially a win-win solution. Neighborhood concerns will be addressed while private schools meeting the regulations will be able to continue their programs. As a result, our children and grandchildren will have available a wide array of summer activities to enrich them in mind, body, and spirit.